



## **National Association of Conservation Districts**

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**Testimony of Mr. Gene Schmidt  
President, National Association of Conservation Districts  
House Agriculture Subcommittee on Conservation, Energy, and Forestry  
Formulation of the 2012 Farm Bill: Conservation Programs  
April 26, 2012**

Good morning, Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Holden, and Members of the Subcommittee. On behalf of the National Association of Conservation Districts and our 3,000 member districts across the country, I thank you for the opportunity to be here today.

As you know, I currently serve as President of NACD. My wife and I own a farm and seed business in Hanna, Indiana, where we farm 1,500 acres of seed corn, seed beans, and wheat. We use a variety of conservation practices on our land, including minimum till, no-till, cover crops, stream buffers and windbreaks. I know firsthand the value – and the necessity – of strong conservation on the land.

Two weeks ago, more than 100 tornadoes swept across the plains. Within the last year we have faced extreme flooding along the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers—among others--affecting thousands of producers and private landowners, and we also witnessed extreme wildfires in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. Last year, the Great Plains and South suffered a record drought, requiring emergency haying and grazing on CRP land; and although we experienced extreme weather conditions, we did not see a reoccurrence of the dust bowl. Why? Because we have implemented many conservation practices that mitigate the risks associated with extreme weather. Conservation programs provide a strong risk management tool -- mitigating risk for producers, landowners, homeowners and local communities.

Conservation Districts are the delivery system set up in the 1930's to be the gate keepers of private working lands. Districts are the local authority to set work priorities, help producers implement practices with accountability, provide resource support for delivery, and bring partnerships and coalitions together. In doing so, we have sustained our most precious resources.

While we understand the current economic climate, we must also acknowledge the investment of putting conservation on the ground. Investing in conservation simply makes sense. Producers are already faced with the challenge of doing more with less, and conservation is a tool that is available to *every* producer. Not only do Farm Bill conservation programs play a key role in supporting clean air, clean water and productive soils, they also help producers implement conservation practices through voluntary, incentive-based methods -- rather than through a top-down regulatory approach -- as well as support our nation's long-term economic and food security. These programs can include developing a strong conservation plan for better accountability of federal dollars spent and streamlining the conservation-program participation processes to allow for quicker and easier accessibility for producers and landowners.

That is why we support the Senate Framework for Title II in the 2012 Farm Bill. We fully recognize the need to get our nation's financial house in order, and we understand that means cuts

to Farm Bill programs. We're extremely pleased that Committee leadership has come up with a strong, balanced plan that fairly recognizes the critical value of locally-led conservation at the landscape scale. We are in a situation where additional cuts to conservation programs, above the \$6 billion outlined in the Senate's version of Title II, will put the very viability of these programs at risk. Congress needs to determine whether conservation and protection of natural resources today is more important than the escalated costs of repair in the future. It's as the old adage goes, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

In light of the budget situation, NACD supports consolidation of programs as an important part of the Conservation Title, and Chief White's Conservation Delivery Streamlining Initiative in the field. Individual, private landowners will benefit from streamlining when programs are easier to access and manage. Farm Bill conservation programs should be resource-driven and locally-led with sufficient flexibility to direct funding to local priorities and concerns. Program delivery must be tailored to the natural resource needs in the states and local areas. Local Conservation District Boards, Local Work Groups and State Technical Committees must help identify local needs, apply limited financial assistance, and maximize conservation benefits.

As we look at consolidation, we must be careful not to lose any of the critical program functions that help complete the cycle of resource needs on the land. For example, consolidation includes farm bill easement programs. Easements retain working lands which over time include the operation and maintenance components that fee simple acquisitions do not. We must assure that the easement programs are maintained to provide for protection of our farmland, wetlands, and highly erodible soils. The easement programs provide a "buffer effect" to land use change, which occur on many fronts of our society as the population grows and more demand is put on our natural resources. Thus, easements effectively secure the natural resources, being protected by conservation practices, to achieve economic and environmental benefits for future generations.

With any further decreases in funding, the implementation of Farm Bill programs would be an additional challenge. Technical assistance is critical to ensuring Farm Bill programs are implemented with accountability. Technical assistance dollars will be more important than ever to ensure we have adequate capabilities to get conservation delivered. For example, we have completed successful work achieving water quality in watersheds across the country, from the East in the Chesapeake to the North in Lake Erie to the West in Oregon. By using Technical Assistance, we help producers implement practices such as using cover crops and conservation tillage to reduce soil erosion and runoff. Having a conservation plan in place allows each producer to look at his resource needs in order to address the bigger picture of resource needs.

In conclusion, these Farm Bill programs show a track record of success, and every dollar spent has seen a return. Because of the 2008 Farm Bill, we are better prepared to meet future resource needs, and we must continue to fund these programs. As some have referenced, we think the Conservation Title may be the hallmark of the 2012 Farm Bill. As a producer, I have used many of these programs on my own operation and know first-hand the tremendous value and return on investment they bring to the producer and even more importantly, to society.

This concludes my testimony. Thank you, again, for allowing me the opportunity to be here today. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

**Committee on Agriculture  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Required Witness Disclosure Form**

**House Rules\* require nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of Federal grants received since October 1, 2008.**

**Name:** Gene Schmidt

**Organization you represent (if any):** President, National Association of Conservation Districts

- 1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2008, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract. House Rules do NOT require disclosure of federal payments to individuals, such as Social Security or Medicare benefits, farm program payments, or assistance to agricultural producers:**

**Source:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Amount:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Source:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Amount:** \_\_\_\_\_

- 2. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) the organization has received since October 1, 2008, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract:**

**Source:** U.S. Forest Service **Amount:** \$572,500

**Source:** U.S.D.A. Natural Resources **Amount:** \$1,901,500

**Please check here if this form is NOT applicable to you:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** Gene Schmidt

*\* Rule XI, clause 2(g)(4) of the U.S. House of Representatives provides: Each committee shall, to the greatest extent practicable, require witnesses who appear before it to submit in advance written statements of proposed testimony and to limit their initial presentations to the committee to brief summaries thereof. In the case of a witness appearing in a nongovernmental capacity, a written statement of proposed testimony shall include a curriculum vitae and a disclosure of the amount and source (by agency and program) of each Federal grant (or subgrant thereof) or contract (or subcontract thereof) received during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years by the witness or by any entity represented by the witness.*

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